



Asbestos: searching for answers in Missoula

Libby deaths put new focus on old issue

By ERICKA SCHENCK SMITH
Missoula Daily Business Journal

Reports of widespread asbestos-related illness in Libby renewed scientific interest in asbestos and how it makes people sick, scientists and doctors said Monday during a conference at the University of Montana.

"For reasons that are not quite clear to me, 25 years ago our country sort of lost interest in the problem of asbestos," said Chris Weiss, a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency toxicologist who was one of a dozen speakers during the first day of the two-day "New Directions and Needs in Asbestos Research" conference, sponsored by UM's Center of Environmental Health Sciences.

Weiss has been working in Libby since 1999; news reports described hundreds of illnesses

and at least 200 deaths related to a former W.R. Grace and Co. vermiculite mine there. The Libby vermiculite ore, used for products ranging from fertilizers to Zonolite home insulation, is contaminated with a little-understood form of asbestos known as tremolite.

The EPA has been working in Libby on an emergency basis since 1999, and the town is expected to become an official Superfund site later this year.

In February, Gov. Judy Martz used the state's lone "silver bullet" to request a speedy Superfund listing for Libby.

More recently, EPA announced

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Federal health official, crowd trade concerns on UM Oval

By BETSY COHEN
Missoula Daily Business Journal

Big things were said in a laid-back chat session Monday evening on the grass on the University of Montana's Oval.

What was scheduled as a town meeting with a national health expert, turned into an intimate back-and-forth discussion about the environmental health woes of Montana. About 30 people attended the gathering, including Kenneth Olden, director of the National Institute of

Environmental Health Sciences, based in North Carolina.

When one member of the talk circle expressed concern that asbestos research is treated by government agencies as an orphan that nobody wants, Olden wholeheartedly agreed.

"There is inadequate attention paid at trying to understand what the reach of many different (asbestos) fibers do," said Olden who is in Missoula this week as keynote

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Kenneth Olden, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, addresses a small gathering Monday evening at a town meeting at the University of Montana Oval. About 30 people attended the meeting.

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Libby

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it would remove Zonolite insulation from Libby-area homes to prevent further exposure to asbestos among people who historically have been exposed to unusually high levels of the toxic tremolite fibers.

The lack of understanding about tremolite is frustrating for doctors, some of whom say asbestos-related diseases in Libby residents appear to be more serious than diseases caused by the more well-known forms of asbestos used to fire-proof ships and buildings.

"It's so frustrating as a clinician to sit back and watch and have your hands basically tied," said Brad Black, a Libby pediatrician who also serves as Lincoln County health officer and director of the Libby Center for Asbestos Related Diseases Clinic. Black said he hopes the gathering will invigorate the

scientific search for treatments for asbestos diseases.

Weis echoed Black:

"We need some young people who are interested in public health, who are interested in science, to pick this up and carry it," Weis said.

Andrij Holian, a researcher studying Libby asbestos with UM's Center for Environmental Health Sciences, is optimistic about the future of asbestos research.

"We know a lot more now than we did five years ago," he said, "and in five years we will probably know a lot more than we do now."

Henry Falk, assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, said the conference is "a window of opportunity to intervene in the process and help people exposed."

"Ultimately, to really help people, we need to find ways to stop progression of the disease," Falk said during a break in Monday's session.

Falk's agency coordinated

medical screening for more than 7,000 current and former Libby residents in the summers of 2000 and 2001. Results from the 2000 testing showed that nearly 18 percent of those examined had some form of asbestos-related lung damage. Among mine workers, the rate was 48.5 percent.

Besides that high rate of disease, Alan Whitehouse, a Spokane chest physician who has treated more than 440 people from Libby, said his patients often are more sick than current beliefs would indicate they should be. In his own research, Whitehouse said people from Libby whose chest X-rays show lung damage that normally wouldn't be worrisome often become very ill, he said.

"This is not a benign disease," he said.

More research is needed to help physicians who work with patients sickened by Libby asbestos, he added.

"I get asked this every day - 'What's going to happen to me?'

- and I don't know how to answer that," Whitehouse said.

Bringing together the doctors who treat the illnesses and the scientists who study them is "the biggest single step to resolve" questions about Libby asbestos, said LeRoy Thom, a former Libby mine worker who was diagnosed with asbestos-related lung damage. Thom was among about a dozen Libby residents who attended the first day of the conference.

"They've sat for like 25 years and not done anything," Thom said of the researchers. Scientists need proof, he said, and now hundreds of Libby patients - and their doctors - have that proof.

State Medical Officer Michael Spence said better understanding is imperative, and testing begun by the ATSDR needs to be continued, along with long-term tracking of the disease progression in current and former Libby residents.

"We cannot in any way predict what the future holds," Spence said.

Oval

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speaker at a UM asbestos conference.

After hearing reports about countless diseases caused by asbestos poisoning to hundreds of Libby residents, Olden said he is frustrated by the situation.

"I don't know how Libby could have happened - it's mind-boggling," he said. "That it could happen in this day and age. I don't know who was asleep at the wheel, and I think every government official should be offended."

"We are underfunding asbestos related research and the government is underfunding

asbestos-related research," Olden said. "I can tell you today that I will go back and we will increase our funding for asbestos-related research."

As director of the national institute, Olden controls a \$700 million budget of taxpayer money that is earmarked for research to find out what role environmental factors play in human diseases.

He also sits on heavy-hitting health and science advisory boards and gives reports to Congress and the president.

Although he has served under three presidents, Olden said his driving philosophy remains the same.

"It won't do us any good to develop all this science if we don't get it out to the

communities," he said.

"What I think about asbestos with Libby is that is an example of a breakdown in the entire communication or response systems, because the science about asbestos had been done in 1964," Olden said. "Back then it was proved that asbestos exposure leads to lung cancer and asbestosis."

Libby, he said, points to raw reality that no national disease tracking system is in place, not every state has a cancer registry and there is no hard and fast government review of existing registries.

Because of those gaps, local, state and federal health agencies do not know if disease rates are higher in one part of a county - or country - than another.

"We just don't know what the American people are exposed to - or what levels," Olden said.

He said he wants to change that statistic by funding research projects that are generated by community need and followed through by local university scientists.

When a participant at Monday evening's gathering asked how people can be protected from a known scientific harm when no government guidelines are in place, Olden said, "Easy."

"We have to empower the public with information so they can take control of their own communities and their own lives."

"There is a lag between the data and applying it to communities," he said. "There is

no lack of science, but lack of progress; but that will be speeded up with the demands from the community."

"Through funding partnerships between the scientific community and the lay public," he added, "we can generate data to convince local and state government to change policies."